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SUBJECT: OBSERVERS NOTE ELECTION SHORTCOMINGS

REF: A. 03 LILONGWE 1202

[B](#). LILONGWE 404

[C](#). LILONGWE 434

[D](#). LILONGWE 438

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Commending the general peaceful conduct of the polls, international election observers nevertheless have noted substantial shortcomings in Malawi's presidential and parliamentary elections. Among them, inequitable access to the state-owned media, the ruling party's use of state resources to campaign, and poor planning and administration by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) feature most prominently. These inadequacies, combined with a general feeling among voters of inability to effect political change, are the likely causes of a relatively low voter turnout. END SUMMARY.

INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVER TEAMS

2. (U) International election observer teams from the European Union (EU), the Commonwealth Secretariat (ComSec), the African Union (AU), the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA), and the Southern Africa Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF) largely agreed in their assessments of Malawi's third democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. While commending the peaceful conduct of the polls and the efforts of local elections officials, the teams noted a skewed playing field resulting from the ruling United Democratic Front's (UDF) use of the state-owned media and public resources to campaign and the poor administration of election logistics as undermining the conduct of the elections.

INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO THE STATE-OWNED MEDIA

3. (U) All observer teams noted that a level playing field did not exist because of the "gross bias of the public media" (ComSec) in favor of the ruling party and the near "exclusion of opposition parties and independent candidates" (EU) in news coverage, which the donor community flagged as a problem throughout the campaign period. The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) Media Monitoring Unit's final report, which assessed media coverage during the entire campaign period (March 20 to May 18), said that state-owned radio station, the only medium with national reach, accorded 92% of coverage to the ruling party; the state-owned television, 81%.

RULING PARTY'S USE OF STATE RESOURCES TO CAMPAIGN

4. (U) All observer teams also expressed concern with the "widespread and overt distribution of money to voters and abuse of state resources by the ruling party" (EU/AU/SADC-PF). The "misuse of the advantages of incumbency" (ComSec) and the focus of campaigns on "personalities and character assassination" rather than on "issues" (AU) detracted from the equitable presentation of issues and policies during the campaign period.

POOR ADMINISTRATION

5. (U) The poor administration of elections logistics, especially the update of the voters' roll, also featured highly in the shortcomings the teams noted. The voter registration process was "deficient" and resulted in "inflated voter registration figures" (EISA). The computerized cleanup of the voters' roll was also "unsatisfactory and resulted in considerable confusion and lack of confidence amongst voters" (EU). The problems with the voters' roll also resulted in the disenfranchisement of some voters, though the numbers are unknown.

6. (SBU) The tabulation and delayed announcement of results, which occurred only three hours before the legislative deadline of 72-hours after the polls closed, have also come under criticism by political parties and civil society groups. There has been no evidence of outright rigging, but MEC's use of "unclean data" for the results is of concern (reftel D). Two opposition parties have announced their complaints will be formalized in legal action against MEC. (NOTE: The delays in tabulation and announcement of results did not feature in the international observers' preliminary

findings because their reports came out before the election results. Observer team representatives have said their final reports will include the issues caused by the delays. END NOTE.)

LOW VOTER TURNOUT

17. (U) 54% of registered voters cast ballots, which is markedly lower than the last presidential election's 92%. Theorizing about the low turnout, civil society leaders have said the late start of civic and voter education and a general feeling of inability to effect political change are likely reasons.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) We concur with the international observers' assessment of the elections. MEC's poor planning and administration, which led to innumerable irregularities, and its failure to ensure a level playing field in the run-up to the polls seriously undermined the conduct of the presidential and parliamentary elections. Without a meaningful public discussion of the issues and without reasonable confidence in the Electoral Commission's handling of the process, the Malawi elections lacked some key elements of a fully democratic contest.
DOUGHERTY